

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Jul '07

Nº 428

To our U.S. members . . .



HAPPY FOURTH OF JULY



GREAT IDEAS
FROM THE
GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

PART IX

Questions About Love and Friendship

97. THE MEASURE OF FRIENDSHIP

Dear Dr. Adler,

A lot has been written about the preciousness of friendship and the joy it brings to our lives. But I wonder if there has been any serious consideration of what friendship is, as apart from mere acquaintance. Why is it that some people we know are our friends and others are just people we know? Why is a true friend so vital to our existence?

L. K.

Dear L. K.,

As you indicate, the desire for friendship is always with us but we do not always have friends. In fact, the first thing that our own experiences, as well as many of the great philosophers, tell us about true friendship is that it is very rare. A lot of our associations seem like friendships at first, only to languish and disappear in time. These lack what might be called the “prerequisites.” In trying to set down what they are, we must begin by clearly distinguishing between relationships that are accidental and transitory and those that are essential and enduring.

Aristotle affords us substantial help here by pointing out that there are three different kinds of friendship: the friendships based (1) on utility, (2) on pleasure, and (3) on virtue.

The friendships of utility and pleasure go together, and are no doubt the most common. Everyone has experienced them. People are “friendly” to their business associates, neighbors, the members of their car pool, and even casual acquaintances on trains, boats, and airplanes. This kind of civility is, to some degree, a form of friendship, the friendship of utility, of mutual convenience. Similarly, people are “friendly” to their golfing partners, to others at a cocktail party, and to acquaintances who entertain them. This is

also a form of friendship, the friendship of pleasure, of mutual enjoyment.

These lower forms of friendship are not necessarily bad but they are inadequate. One of their defects results from the fact that they depend on and vary with circumstance. This is why they can quickly arise and just as quickly disappear. By contrast, when the Book of Proverbs says, “A friend loveth at all times,” it is referring to a higher form of friendship that does not depend on circumstance. In order to surmount the effects of time and happenstance, it must be based on the inherent qualities of the individuals involved. A friendship so anchored cannot be a passing friendship.

True friendship, then, surpasses (though it often also includes) both utility and pleasure. For Aristotle, such a friendship must be based on virtue, on a good moral character. Only in that way can it last. Further, it must develop slowly, since it presupposes familiarity, knowledge, and—eventually—mutual trust.

Aristotle goes on to observe:

This kind of friendship, then, is perfect both in respect of duration and in all other respects, and in it each gets from each in all respects the same as, or something like what, he gives; which is what ought to happen between friends.

Perfect friendship, then, also presupposes a certain equality of status. Montaigne, speaking of the kinds of human relationships, confirms this when he says:

That of children to parents is rather respect: friendship is nourished by communication which cannot, by reason of the great disparity, be betwixt these.

Parents can no more be friends to their children than teachers can be to their students. For the essence of friendship is reciprocity: giving and getting something like what you give. Parents see to the proper development of their children, and teachers guide the shaping of their students’ minds. Children and students cannot reciprocate in kind.

It should be clear now why real friendship requires more than merely having “*something* in common.” It is *what* people have in common that determines the kind of friendship they will have. True friendship requires at least a sound moral character out of the richness of which individuals are able to give and get this precious

affection. And the more individuals give, the more they realize a genuine kind of selflessness, the better friends they are. A good man will not only do for his friend what he would do for himself, but will, if necessary, do more.

These prerequisites being hard to fulfill, true friendship is bound to be rare. To acquire a real friend, therefore, is one of the most praiseworthy accomplishments in life. Montaigne tells a story of Cyrus, the ruler of Persia. He was asked whether he would exchange a valuable horse, on which he had just won a race, for a kingdom. Cyrus replied, "No, truly, sir, but I would give him with all my heart to get thereby a true friend, could I find out any man worthy of that affiance."

98. THE ART OF CONVERSATION

Dear Dr. Adler,

Conversation seems to have become a thing of the past. People don't seem to be able to communicate with one another any more. Even in the staged "conversations" on TV and radio, they seem to be talking to themselves rather than to each other. Would you please give us some practical pointers on how to conduct a conversation properly? What makes a man a good conversationalist?

L. W.

Dear L. W.,

The lack of good conversation results because people take conversational ability for granted. They think that a man has either been given the gift of gab or he hasn't. The truth is that conversation is an art. Like any other artistic ability, it requires training and discipline. Practice improves it. So does being constantly aware of where conversational mistakes can be made. I find that asking myself the following questions is a great help.

(1) *What* am I talking about? Conversation has to have a solid foundation. Those involved have to know what the subject is. If they don't, the talk will be lopsided. Like any jerry-built structure, it is bound to come tumbling down in confusion.

Hence the following rules should be observed. Begin by stating your own views in the shortest, clearest way you can. Have the other fellow restate them in his own terms and to your satisfaction.

Then do the same for what he has to say. If you insist on this, what you are talking about will be clear from the start. And if you don't hop, skip, and jump all over the conversational landscape thereafter, the subject won't be lost.

(2) *With whom* am I conversing? Most people are interested in some subjects but not others. If you and someone else share a common interest, fine. If not, you can try to establish it. But if, after a few good tries, you see that the other party doesn't respond, don't force it. If you do, you will very often find that you have wasted your time.

(3) *Under what circumstances* is the conversation taking place? There are times and places for heavy talk, times and places for light talk, and times and places for no talk at all. Many good conversations are botched from the beginning by the participants' not being able to tell the difference.

Try always to weigh the external factors that can affect conversation. If certain favorable conditions are lacking, try to estimate how much they will disturb the talk. If they are all lacking, if the circumstances are stacked against you, then don't even try. You have to play this by ear, but if you keep the circumstances in mind, you won't make so many mistakes.

(4) *Why* am I engaged in this conversation? No one is more disliked than the fellow who argues for the sake of argument. He is the windbag who supports the notion that "talk is cheap" when, in fact, it is one of the most precious things in the world.

To be merely contentious is not to converse. When we try to laugh off a telling argument or ridicule the other party, when we agree or disagree without understanding, when we become sarcastic, and when we break off a discussion on some pretext, we are not conversing. All we get is the result our dubious tactics merit—the cheap victory that they bring us.

(5) *How* should I say what is on my mind? Every good conversationalist has a style. The better he is, the more flexible is his style. He knows that the vocabularies, experiences, blind spots, interests, and beliefs of individuals differ greatly. To get across what he has to say, therefore, he is constantly making adjustments in his manner of speaking. He never falls into rigid patterns.

(6) *When* should certain things be said? As important as style in conversation is timing. You can do everything else correctly, but

if you say the right thing at the wrong time, you've failed. Sensing the critical moment in a conversation is not easy. I know of no conversational skill more difficult to acquire. And the reason it is so difficult is that it requires you to listen to the other fellow.

There is no such thing as a spontaneously good conversationalist. The man who talks quickly, effortlessly, and well does not have a special inspiration. He has learned to converse and has worked hard so that good conversational habits are part of him. If you ask him, he will tell you that in the beginning it was quite hard and he was always asking himself: What? With whom? Under what circumstances? Why? How? And When?

RECOMMENDED READINGS

In Great Books of the Western World

- Plato: *Lysis*; *Phaedrus*; *Symposium*; *Republic*, Book III, pp. 401-403, Book V
- Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books VIII—IX; *Rhetoric*, Book II, Ch. 4
- Lucretius: *On the Nature of Things*, Book IV
- Epictetus: *The Discourses*, Book II, Ch. 22
- Plotinus: *The Enneads*, Ennead III, Tractate 5, Ennead VI, Tractate 9
- Augustine: *The Confessions*, Book IV, par. 7-20, Book VIII, par. 10—30, Book X, par. 38—70; *The City of God*, Book XII, Chs. 8—9, Book XIV, Ch. 7, Book XV, Chs. 22—23, Book XIX, Chs. 8—17; *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I
- Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, Parts I—II, QQ. 26-29, 106-108, Part II—II, QQ. 23—44, 179—182
- Machiavelli: *The Prince*, Chs. XVII, XIX
- Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Part I, Ch. 6
- Montaigne: *Essays*, “That the Soul Discharges Her Passions upon False Objects, Where the True Are Wanting,” “Of Friendship,” “Of Solitude,” “Of Smells,” “Of the Affection of Fathers to Their Children,” “That Our Desires Are Augmented by Difficulty,” “Of Three Good Women,” “Of Three Commerces,” “Upon Some Verses of Virgil”
- Spinoza: *Ethics*, Parts III—V
- Darwin: *The Descent of Man*, Chs. VIII, XVII—XX
- James: *The Principles of Psychology*, Ch. XXIV, “Sociability and Shyness,” “Modesty,” “Shame,” “Love,” “Jealousy,” “Parental Love”

Freud: *The Origin and Development of Psycho-Analysis*, Lectures IV—V; *Selected Papers on Hysteria*, especially Chs. 9-10; “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children”; “Observations on Wild Psycho-Analysis”; *The Interpretation of Dreams*, V. D. (b) “Dreams of the Death of Beloved Persons”; “On Narcissism”; *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*; *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Lectures 20-21, 26-27; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego*, especially Section VIII; *The Ego and the Id*; *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sections IV-VII; *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Lectures 32-33

Other Works

Aquinas, Thomas: *On Aristotle's Love and Friendship*
 Bacon, Francis: *Essays*, “Of Love,” “Of Friendship,” “Of Followers and Friends”
 Buber, Martin: *I and Thou; Between Man and Man*, I. “Dialogue,” II. “The Question to the Single One”
 Dante Alighieri: *The New Life; The Banquet*
 D'Arcy, Martin C.: *The Mind and Heart of Love*
 Ellis, Havelock: *Studies in the Psychology of Sex; On Life and Sex*
 Freud, Sigmund: *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*
 Gourmont, Remy de: *The Natural Philosophy of Love*
 Hunt, Morton M.: *The Natural History of Love*
 Kierkegaard, Søren: *Either/Or; The Stages on Life's Way; The Works of Love*
 Kinsey, Alfred C. and others: *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female; Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*
 Lawrence, D. H.: *Sex, Literature, and Censorship*
 Lewis, C. S.: *The Allegory of Love*
 Malinowski, Bronislaw: *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*
 Mead, Margaret: *Male and Female*
 Menninger, Karl A.: *Love Against Hate*
 Nygren, Anders: *Agape and Eros*
 Ortega y Gasset, José: *On Love*
 Ovid: *The Art of Love*
 Reik, Theodor: *Of Love and Lust*
 Rougemont, Denis de: *Love in the Western World*
 Russell, Bertrand: *Marriage and Morals*
 Stendhal, M. H. B.: *On Love*
 Suttie, Ian D.: *The Origins of Love and Hate*
 Thibon, Gustav: *What God Has Joined Together*
 Thurber, James, and White, E. B.: *Is Sex Necessary?*
 Tolstoy, Leo: *The Law of Love and the Law of Violence*

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Derek Bitter

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.